

# Symbolism and pathetic fallacy in the things they carried by tim obrien research ...

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Edgar V Roberts and Robert Zweig in their " Introduction to Reading and Writing" tell readers about the importance of symbolism within a story. " The Things They Carried" is a non-fictional account that centers on the main character Tim O'Brien about his experience in the Vietnam War. The novel starts by listing off different things that members of the author's company, The Alpha Company, carried. Members of the company carried things with them on their assigned missions. The novel is a series of different stories, but some of the same characters weave in and out of them. Many of the things within the story mean more than is readily apparent and are symbolic of deeper meanings that hold the story together. This essay looks at some of the symbolism found within the book. Inanimate objects came to represent things. Also they were windows into the souls of the soldiers carrying Simple objects, like M&Ms or the memory of a person can symbolize something greater than themselves and transport a person out of their present and to a place of greater comfort. Symbolism appears from what each object represents in " The Things They Carried." The theme is objects that take on on a meaning other than their intended, this is the theme and it is achieved through symbolism. There is in literature something called " the pathetic fallacy" which is defined as non-living objects taking on a life. This plays a part of the symbolism in the story. This happens for many of the symbolic things carried by the soldiers.

Soldiers were loaded down with gear, so could carry very few personal affects. In talking about Rat Kiley, who was a medic, he carried little more than what his duties required him to carry, " Morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape" (O'Brien, 5). But he also carried candy,

M&M's for " Especially bad wounds." This showed his humanity and regard for the other soldiers well-being. The M&Ms represented more than a treat for soldiers, but a gesture in mercy.

Symbolism appears in the way that the author gets to the heart and triggering emotions from readers. An example is the following quotation, which is nothing short of both difficult to read, but still beautiful in a way: " They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. They died so as not to die of embarrassment." (O'Brien, 26).

This is an understatement of what the soldiers really feared. A blush is symbolic of embarrassment, but here it is used to mean more than simply a flush at awkwardness. Soldiers had left their homes, families and lives in order to go to a country they had never been for and risk their lives at being killed. Many, if they were honest with themselves, would not have been as eager to go to war, but they felt a sense of obligation to go because it was considered unpatriotic, and was even illegal for them to choose not to. Throughout the book, the surroundings, sometimes the jungle is used to reflect what characters are feeling inside.

Linda was O'Brien's childhood girlfriend who at the time of the writing had already been dead from cancer. When he remembers her, he does not dream of her bandages or scars that appeared at the end of her life, but he remembers her in her prime. Linda symbolizes then for O'Brien, the innocence of home. His memory of her represents that no matter how horrible and hellish things seem in the present, that there existed a place of childhood innocence where life was much easier. His reflections and dreams of her death are also symbolic of the death that he sees around him. Her

death was the first time that he realized and fully understood that our lives and people around us are fragile and can be taken away.

War can be thought of as the failure of mankind to operate in peace and harmony. "The Things They Carried" is a window into that world of struggles that soldiers go through. What O'Brien does with his story that is different from many war movies or stories, is he focuses on the mundane aspects of a soldier's life. We have access to his daily thoughts, and the daily justifications and stories that a soldier has to tell his/herself in order to be able to make it through another day.

Without calling them symbols to themselves, all of the soldiers have some personal detail that they carry with them. This can be as insignificant as the doctor who carried M&Ms, or O'Brien who carries with him a memory of a childhood friend. Both the memory of Linda and the M&Ms are important because they point not to themselves, but to higher truths and understandings that transcend their actual meaning.

## **Works Cited**

O'Brien, Tim *The Things They Carried* Roberts, Edgar V., and Henry E. Jacobs. *Literature: an introduction to reading and writing*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1998. Print.